



**Fish, Wildlife and Parks Access Program Staff Report for PL/PW**

March-April 2023

**Block Management:**

Landowner appreciation dinners were a resounding success across much of the state in February and March. Some Regions have completed their dinners for the year, and some will continue over the next few months (Regions 2, 3, 5). A highlight this year was being able to host the Governor for a BMA ranch tour on the Meuli Ranch and later at the Kalispell landowner appreciation dinner. There, he also gave out longevity awards to Stimson Lumber and Stoltze Lumber for their continued participation in the program for over 20 years.



*Gov. Gianforte and First Lady Susan Gianforte visit the Meuli Ranch Block Management Area.*



*Region 7 Landowner Appreciation Dinner – Miles City  
Largest dinner in the state with over 205 registered.*



*Gov. Gianforte, Macy Dugan Region 1 Access Manager,  
Representative from Stoltze at Kalispell dinner.*



*As a part of attending the Region 7 dinners, landowners were entered into a drawing for a calf shelter. The Miles City based non-profit Montana Hunters for Access raised over \$1,800 for prizes and gift cards, provided a hydraulic post-hole digger along with two calf shelters to be given away to participating Block Management landowners. Colstrip Sportsmen’s club was also present to provide gate closers and say “thank you”.*



*Region 4 Landowner Appreciation Dinner - Great Falls  
First year dinners have been held in Region 4.*

These dinners are a small way FWP shows appreciation for landowners that participate in FWP Access Programs and provides landowners the opportunity to share a meal and spend some quality time with their neighbors and meet agency staff.

Access staff have been very busy getting Block Management statistics and data from the 2022 hunting season compiled, summarized, and updated on agreements and sent out to private landowners to plan for the 2023 hunting seasons. Some Regions mail contracts and meet directly with landowners to navigate changes, while others utilize non-access staff to conduct contract negotiations with landowners. The focus of renewing Block Management Agreements is to build and maintain on the ground relationships and local knowledge between FWP access staff, game wardens, wildlife biologists, and private landowners.



**BLOCK MANAGEMENT**  
MONTANA FISH, WILDLIFE & PARKS

The legislature has passed Senate Bill 58 to increase the maximum payment for Block Management landowners to \$50,000 (from current \$25,000 cap). It's expected the Governor will sign the bill early April and staff will implement the new cap for the 2023 hunting season.

### **Public Access Land Agreements/Unlocking Public Lands**

Access staff met to conduct a statewide review of received applications for the Public Access Land Agreement (PALA) program. Applications are currently being reviewed by a Regional Enrollment Committees to include local PL/PW members to develop a PL/PW recommendation to the Department on whether to extent an agreement. A statewide review will be provided at the May PL/PW meeting, but the Regional process replaces the full multi-day PL/PW review with recommendations coming at the local level. Should agreements be offered and signed by landowners and the Department, 222,453 of public land acres will be opened through the PALA program.

The PALA Administrative Rule update process was wrapped up March 10. This rule change will specifically reduce the 2-mile to 1-mile eligibility criteria and provide the Department the opportunity to consider other circumstances related to agreements.

The legislature continues to work through HB438 which will remove the \$5 application fee for the PALA program as well as provide the opportunity for the Department to not put a project into the process if it does not meet eligibility criteria.

Four landowners re-enrolled the Unlocking Public Lands Program resulting in 5 agreements.

### **Elk Hunting Access Agreements (454 Program)**

Access staff are starting to receive applications for the Elk Hunting Access Agreement program (454 Program). Applications are reviewed by the Licensing Bureau and then are submitted to Regional staff (access, wildlife, enforcement) for their awareness, to assess the impact to the elk resource and to evaluate potential for accommodating public hunting opportunity on lands offered in the agreement during the general season.

The 2022 EHA summary report was drafted along with the cover sheet for the Commission. The report will be posted to the Commission website mid-April when June Fish and Wildlife Commission agenda topics are posted for public review and comment. Applications and agreements for 2023 will be posted on the FWP website May 25 and available for review with a final decision taking place at the June 8 Commission Meeting.

### **Recreation Management Areas - Biennial Rule**

Access staff worked with landowners currently enrolled in the Recreation Management program (The Nature Conservancy, Avista Utilities, Stimson Lumber Company) to submit a renewal of the Biennial Rules on enrolled lands. The coversheet and associated documents will be posted mid-April for public review/comment with final decision taking place at the June 8 Commission Meeting.